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Meese Favors Reducing Total of Classified Data

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WASHINGTON, March 20 — Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d said today that any Government decision to prosecute journalists for making secrets public would "depend on the circumstances of the case."

"I think and I would hope," Mr. Meese said, "that journalistic ethics would prevent people who have obtained what is in effect stolen property, stolen information, from utilizing it in a way that would compromise or hurt the national interest."

Mr. Meese, in a question-and-answer session after a luncheon speech to the Washington Press Club, was asked whether he favored prosecuting journalists for publicizing classified information that was disclosed to them without authorization.

The Reagan Administration has repeatedly expressed concern over the potential for unauthorized disclosures of information that would endanger national security. In 1983 it attempted to tighten procedures for the handling of such information through an order requiring many more Federal employees to sign secrecy agreements and expanding the use of the polygraph, or lie detector, to investigate breaches of security.

C.I.A. Proposes Legislation

The order, which drew a storm of protest from civil libertarians, also drew enough criticism from Congress to prompt the Administration to withdraw its key provisions. But since then the Administration has demonstrated its displeasure with unauthorized disclosures in other ways, and is now considering a Central Intelligence Agency proposal to make it a crime for Government employees to disclose national secrets without permission.

Today, however, Mr. Meese rejected the suggestion that the Administration had restricted access to information and said it had instead reduced the amount of information that was classified, which he said he applauded.

"We have far too much classified information in the Federal Government," Mr. Meese added. "A lot of things which shouldn't be classified are, and therefore there is kind of a hothouse attitude toward the protection of national security information."

He called for a "tightening up" on classification "so that only material that really has to be kept secret in the interests of national defense or national security is classified, and then that the news media as well as Government officials work together to make be sure that that information is not improperly disclosed."

'Open Administration' Approved

"I think that ultimately is the solution to this whole problem," Mr. Meese said.

Mr. Meese, who has at times been depicted as hostile to the press, pledged an "open administration" in his tenure as Attorney General.

"We have a responsibility," he told the audience of reporters, "to get together to provide timely and accurate

information to the public about the Department of Justice and its activities as well as about the legal system. We have a mutual interest, really, and a need for each other."

"Sometimes there is a temptation in Government to close up sources of information," he said, adding that he would seek "to avoid this temptation" and try instead "to work cooperatively."

He Says He'll Meet Mexican

Mr. Meese emphasized the role of the Federal Government in combating crime, which he defined as one of his top priorities.

He said he would meet in Washington this Friday with the Attorney General of Mexico, Sergio Garcia Ramirez, to begin "in-depth discussions" of the drug traffic and of "serious problems" Mexico represented in that area.

Later, in response to a question, he said he would discuss the possibility of extraditing to this country those arrested in Mexico in the murder of an American narcotics agent. But it will probably "be better," he said, to leave prosecution to the Mexicans.

Mr. Meese said he would also meet soon with the President of Colombia, Belisario Betancur, to discuss combating narcotics.

On another subject, Mr. Meese said that "cracking down on crime doesn't mean that we as a society should tolerate inhumane prison conditions." In the last 25 years, he said, there had been a 435 percent increase in serious crime, a 425 percent increase in arrests, but only a 71 percent increase in prison space, a situation he said he wanted to help correct.